DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 994 CS 008 651

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TITLE Narrative Deviance: The Conventional and the Creative in Reading and Writing.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Conference on the Teaching of English (4th, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, May 11-16, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creative Writing; *Discourse Analysis; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Expressive Language; *Fiction; Grade 11; High Schools; Instructional Innovation; Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; Metacognition; Reader Response; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Processes; *Reading Writing Relationship; Receptive Language; Schemata (Cognition); Speech Communication; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Australia; Discourse; Narrative Text; *Story Structure; *Text Structure

ABSTRACT

If young readers (adolescents) are introduced to a range of story structures and less structured texts (or "deviant narratives"), it may encourage the development of more diverse and accommodating schemata and the capacity to make inferences about the link between discourse units. It is, after all, a basic principle of recent narrative theory that texts instruct in their own readings. Comprehension is not just information-processing and recall; it lies in the (re)creative interactions between text and reader. And reading is an activity that is not ultimately separate from writing; each is a re-creative act interpenetrated by the other. In an experimental sequence conducted in Australia, Year 11 students read three narratives, all of which deviate in some way from orthodox plot structure and frustrate "normal" narrative expectations. Through a questionnaire and discussion their reactions were elicited, and they were encouraged to discover how some "stories" operate on different narrative principles, and how in their reading they were actively constructing the meaning of the text. To continue the experiment, the students were also asked to complete a story whose first page was supplied, without the author's name. (Student commentaries are included.) (NKA)

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NARRATIVE DEVIANCE

The Conventional and the Creative in Reading and Writing

Wendy R. Morgan

"I don't like to have demands made of me as a reader." That was the confession of a seventeen-year old secondary schoolboy in the course of the research experiment I'm about to describe to you. Another student dismissed an unconventional text as "a madman's ramblings" which "would probably not be well-rounded anyway." As teachers at any level you'll know all too well such reluctance or suspicion as even fluent readers confront fictional narratives which deviate from the norms they're familiar with.

Responses like these may seem to confirm the long-orthodox view, summed up in Poe's famous dictum, that satisfying stories must convey a "unity of impression," a "single effect"; and that this is created by a series of connected events, with initial conflict, sequential action, and resolution. These Aristotelian certainties have of course been interrogated in current literary and theoretical writings; but they still find their way into college texts and official English curricular statements. For instance, the Course Description for the Higher School Certificate in English at Year 12 in Victoria, Australia, advises that students' writing should be "coherent," "unified," "clearly understood" and should exhibit "logical or chronological order." The same should presumably be true of the models for such writing.

One might simply shrug, although deploring the narrowness of the criteria. But exactly the same simplistic notions are recycled, in scientistic guise, by the information-processing psychologists, whose research and theory are currently influential in reading education. Let me give you a very brief summary of their theories, to set in context the kinds of reading and writing experiments I've been undertaking.

These cognitive psychologists assume that a child's comprehension of a story can be measured by the ability to recall its events in their sequential order. Accuracy of recall will depend on the salience of the story's structure. For stored up in memory is a "story schema" or idealised mental representation of the parts and relationships of the typical story: it has an invariant sequence -- of setting and exposition; complication through a series of episodes, each linked in a temporal and causal sequence; and a resolution. Against this paradigm the reader measures the particular story,

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and if it deviates from the canonical schema, memory will make the narrative conform by substituting a more orthodox structural and semantic cohesiveness. Consequently, we are told, young readers should be given "well-structured" stories in order to develop the prototypes they need for comprehension.

Now even if we grant that such schemata are vital not just to recall but also to comprehension and the development of a reader's competence, there is a logical consequence which the psychologists have neglected. If apprentice readers must learn to deal with increasingly novel and complex stories, then presumably we should introduce even fairly young children to more than one story model so that they become familiar with a range of structures for organising information. Conceivably, such stories could lead the reader to modify or add to his or her general schemata so that they become more diverse and accommodating. It may be similarly important gradually to introduce less structured material, even that which flouts the "rules" of the "discourse grammars." Some information-processing research indicates that if children are to comprehend narratives they need more than a prior structural schema; they must also be able to make inferences about the links between discourse units. Hence familiarity with what I call "deviant narratives" may well foster the capacity to supply such implicit links. It is after all a basic principle of recent narrative theory, which the psychologists seem not to know, that texts instruct in their own readings.

It follows that our job as teachers is to help our students read a text in the light of the strategies which that text sets up. We know that children and adults alike, as they read, may have a more profound understanding of the complex patterns of a narrative than they can verbalise in recall. Indeed, many stories themselves are more fluidly subtle in the relations of their parts than the story-grammars allow for. You will doubtless have raised an eyebrow at the psychologists' notion that such reductive general models are the end-point of reading. That theory cannot explain a writer's pleasure in playing with a reader's schematic or generic expectations, or a reader's pleasure in participating in that game. Comprehension is not just information-processing and recall; it lies in the (re)creative interactions between text and reader.

In emphasising readers' receptivity, the information-processing researchers have ignored as irrelevant that dimension of creativity. (They would subscribe, no doubt, to a dubious concept of creativity as pure, unmediated originality, and limit its operations to something called "creative writing.") That presumed distinction between the activities of reader and writer has affected both teachers and students: we often expect that by the time they reach the upper secondary years adolescents will be more sophisticated as readers, passive consumers of "great" literature, than

as writers, producers of literary texts; and our students concur with our view of them. But reading is an activity which is not ultimately separate from writing; each is a re-creative act interpenetrated by the other. Thus not only readers but also writers might develop flexibility as they learn to produce a diverse range of narrative exempla in both reading and writing.

That is the hypothesis which has underpinned my research. More specifically, I have been investigating ways of reducing that discrepancy of roles, by encouraging upper secondary students to interrogate and go beyond the conventional story structure models with their coherent sequence of episodes reaching a conclusive closure. Let me now describe each phase of my first experimental sequence and my findings.

The sessions were conducted in English classes, at The Geelong College, with a group of seventeen-year-olds. Throughout their secondary schooling they have practised imaginative writing and studied a number of "classics" in a heavily canonical syllabus.

Before the first session the students were asked to write an imaginative piece on "A Change of Mind" -- a topic which I privately hoped could reveal which students if any were prepared to diverge from the most conventional structure of making the change of mind serve as climax and resolution of their story.

Some of the stories proved to be ingeniously inventive in their setting; others were much more pedestrian. But whether the subject was a witty exchange of minds between a doctor and a revenant brain surgeon or a homily on the dangers of taking a short-cut on an unsealed road, without exception the students chose some inflexion of the mode of narrative realism and offered a straightforward development of cause and effect from setting through complications to a closure that was usually emphatic. Even the story which showed most flair -- it concerned the visit of a disciple to his hero Nietzsche, who is found reduced to bestiality and exhibited in a cage by his sister -- is rounded off with the ex-disciple in his study, mouthing his pipe and platitudes about life's meaning. So strong, it seems, was the writer's desire for a conventional ending.

For the first session the students read three narratives: "A Country Doctor" by Franz Kafka, "So Small" and "Objects" by Ania Walwicz. All deviate in some way from orthodox plot structure and frustrate "normal" narrative expectations. Through questionnaire and discussion I aimed to elicit students' reactions and encourage them to discover how some "stories" operate on different narrative principles, and how in their reading they were actively constructing the meaning of the text.

The questionnaire asked first, of the Kafka story: "Are you satisfied with the way the story ended?" Some readers were dissatisfied, because they wanted to know if the doctor got home safely (though one noted that "if these answers were handed to you there would be nothing to ponder"). Others commented that story-line and meaning were at odds. As one wrote, "it was difficult to connect one event or sentence with the previous one, let alone with a predictable ending."

The second question asked, "Did you change your mind, at any stage while reading the story, about how you expected it would end?" In general, the students noted that, in reading, they became increasingly surprised and uncertain, until eventually their only expectation was that anything unexpected could happen. One student wrote, "I found myself with no feasible conclusion and so read on relentlessly to discover it." (I shall consider the implications of that point when I come to discuss my second set of investigations.)

In writing about "So Small," the students showed perplexity or even hostility towards its stylistic fluidity and lack of narrative coherence. The apparent illogicalities of the text constituted lunacy in either the writer or the reader ("this story has me crazed"). Some were dissatisfied with the ending, which had "gone full circle and got nowhere." Two students however noted that there was no "real" start or ending to the monologue, so that a neat conclusion would only have been contrived. Such indirection is intensified by the density of the prose and its repetitions, and this too frustrated the development of the readers' expectations. As one student wrote, of "Objects": "It takes the time you read the story to determine what it is about, and by then you cannot judge the end, since you have already reached it." This student, at least, was moving towards an apprehension of the reading process.

The discussion which followed their written answers gave the students a chance to air their perplexity, uneasiness and even hostility. But when they located the points in the Kafka story at which it departs increasingly from realism, and discussed the significance of those "derailments", many students began to find a different sense of story emerging. That is, since the overt narrative sequence made no satisfactory sense, meaning had to be constructed out of those elements to which the reader's attention was thus being drawn. The meaning of the story, which questioned the nature of reality and truth, was enacted in the very procedure of reading set up in the narrative. So much emerged unforcedly from discussion.

The students were perhaps able to move towards such a reading because they are learning to read for a symbolic meaning. They have not learned to handle prose like Walwicz's. All agreed that "So Small" did not fit the

generic category of "short story" as they know it. Moreover, it became clear in discussion that the less able writers had found it especially difficult to detect any syntactic or semantic cohesiveness because all their attention had been focused at the infra-sentence level. (Such "tunnel-vision" is of course characteristic of readers attacking a text to which they bring little prior understanding.) Hence they were not able to set up any mental expectations about development or ending.

When I asked if they felt this style of writing was appropriate to the subject, several students suggested that it conveyed an obsessive preoccupation with the impossibility of development. That is, they were beginning to discover that the meaning of the piece lay not in any "plot", but in the reader's participating in the act of narration. In the way the style makes us read lies its meaning.

But some were less receptive to such textual experience. One boy (he who had written so ably of Nietzsche) summed up his resistance with that comment I used to introduce this paper: "I don't like to have demands made of me as a reader." Like some others, he wanted to be a passive receptor of a well-made narrative whose meaning was completely accessible. (But of course, there is no such thing as a story without any gaps.) In discussion these students made it clear that they are reluctant to construct their own interpretations. It's not just that bridging the inferential gaps is hard work; it's also that they cannot feel confident about the authority or "correctness" of their constructions. Students' dependence on pedagogical authority often goes hand in hand with an entrenched conservatism in reading, especially when their whole educational experience, and their teachers' theoretical presumptions about the single meaning of a text, have reinforced that attitude.

To follow up this session, the students were asked to complete a story whose first page was supplied, without the author's name. (The story was "A Dream", by Kafka.) The task might suggest to them that reading and writing need not be discrete skills. And I was interested to see how many would explore the surreal potential and illogicalities licensed by the dream setting, and how many would conclude conventionally, with the character awakening.

A few students ignored in their continuations the features of what they'd read; that is, they were not writing as readers -- or reading as writers. The least able students gave their dreams a pedestrianly realistic turn, though most writers attempted to maintain the dream-like illogicality of events. A few narratives suggested that dream becomes reality which becomes dream-like -- or that our waking reality is confounded by a world that operates according to other laws.

More than half the stories confirmed the expectations set up in the opening and had K.'s own name appear on the gravestone, foretelling his death. Several others had K.'s near and dear substituted for himself as dream becomes reality. And a few departed from the expectations set up by the tone by substituting a weakly humorous cop-out ending (e.g. it was K.'s canary for whom the grave was intended; whereupon K. died of relief). Only half the students had K. waking at the end. Some left him in his dream-world; others left him for dead. A couple of more innovative stories ended with a vision of a transcendent reality or suggested questions about the meaning of death. Only one student had his ending return to the opening words of the original: "Joseph K. awoke. It was a beautiful day...", alluding thus to the intermingling of waking and dreaming realities. (This was the student who in his written responses on "So Small" had grasped the point of its circularity.)

In general -- speaking impressionistically -- these stories were more innovative than the pretests, and at times unexpected in their departures from the predictably conclusive. It may be, of course, that the students had by now gauged my preferences; or perhaps the given opening offered them some direction and momentum, something to work <u>from</u>, as readers became writers.

In the next session the students were to read and make written responses as before to another text, "Snow," by Ted Hughes. This story, too, frustrates a reader's attempts to make sense of it through any overt narrative line. My aim at this stage was to see if there was any perceptible development in the students' reading strategies.

This story has a number of similarities to "A Country Doctor," particularly in its increasingly bizarre departures from everyday reality. Perhaps alerted by their previous reading, a number of students felt that a conclusive ending to this story (the narrator's death or rescue) would be contrived. "The ending," noted one, "is largely in line with the rest of the story, in that it is open-ended." Several distinguished between their hopes and expectations; as one wrote, "It would have been nice if he had got out of the snow. But given ... the unusual aspects of the story, I did not really expect this, but rather hoped for it. Just as anyone desires a nice happy and logical ending." Another student, too, was aware not only that a sense of genre governed his expectations, but also that the story thwarted these: "My desire for coherence and the conventional milieu of most of the rest of my literature led me to believe that this was a simple plane crash survivor story. It became abundantly clear in due course that this was not so."

In the ensuing discussion the students themselves suggested its similarity to "A Country Doctor" and noted that, because the overt narrative does not square with probability, they were forced to look for meaning elsewhere --

in the narrator's line of reasoning which runs counter to the reality he has proposed for himself. They discovered in shared talk that all the "facts" were no more than the narrator's mental construct of a reassuring "reality" -- and thus he reveals unwittingly what he has concealed from himself. In such ways as this, I reminded the students, they'd discovered that writers and readers can construct meaning through stories that don't seem to "get anywhere."

As the session ended here, a girl came up with her pre-test story, about a man contemplating suicide. She volunteered her realisation that she could have made it more interesting by reproducing, in language and style, her subject's thoughts and constructing the narrative itself out of their development. (She had in fact made an important discovery: that even a seemingly personal, "real-life" voice is a literary effect in a text.)

As a final exercise, the students were set another writing task. The topic was "The End of the Tunnel," chosen because it is amenable to a kind of "tunnel-vision" development to an obvious ending. It would be interesting to see if any students chose a more innovative mode of narration, and whether this could have been fostered by their recent discoveries about narrative possibilities.

The "conclusions" to many of the stories still exhibited that "tunnel-vision," so that progress through the tunnel dictated the direction of the narrative, and emergence provided the ending. Those students who in their reading and discussion had showed themselves most puzzled by and resentful of narrative derangements told predictable tales of prisoners of war digging their way to freedom. Several more ingenious stories suggested that emergence is never so complete, or is marked by irony. One writer, whose pre-test had been a sci-fi thriller, wrote a dialogue in poetic form, setting out antithetically the words of Satan and the responses of a soul in whom understanding and despair dawn together. The setting is the entrance to the tunnel; at the end, which is not reached, is Hell and a second death. Only one student was clearly making use of the alternative forms of narrative offered in the readings: she wrote an exploratory first-person present-tense piece suggesting that learning and experience are body-centered and perhaps circular. This was the student who had concluded K.'s dream with the weak humour of the canary's death; here, it seems, she at least felt free to explore other, less conclusive modes of style and structure. If almost all the students conformed to obvious lines of narrative completeness, this is probably consequent on the assigned subject. A quite different kind of exercise might have offered them more "permission" to experiment.

Looking back over this sequence of activities, I concede that the students, as readers and writers, continued generally to prefer narratives orthodox

in style and form. Of course, to be presented in one week with four "deviant" texts is too limited an experience to overthrow years of traditional education. Much will depend on the openness of particular individuals towards the challenge of novelty and on their confidence in themselves as readers and writers. Students presumably need to understand and feel comfortable with those new narrative principles in their reading before they are ready to experiment in writing. Who knows what incubation period is needed for the development of creative processes? The quick-return creative products used to judge the success of this experiment may not of course reflect the ultimate influence of the program.

The brevity of this experiment may also help to explain why it is difficult to detect a transfer from reading to writing in the majority of cases. And while the students had the chance to discuss their reading, they did not have the same opportunity in their writing, to try out meanings as they read each others' work and redrafted their own for fellow readers. This isolation may well have limited the discoveries they could make in writing. So it had been with their reading. Responding on their own in their questionnaires, they were more inclined to be uncertain and unreceptive. But when they shared their reservations in discussion and found that their uncertainties did not necessarily mark them as inadequate readers but were integral to the reading experience -- then many of them could relax and together construct their meanings.

I have one further comment on this experiment: as teacher-researcher I set up the activities, determined the questions and directed the students towards their answers. That is, despite their inevitably productive role as readers (and writers) they could still conceive of themselves as consumers.

This brings me to my second kind of reading and writing investigation, which (among other things) attempts to address that contradiction. Now, as my first experiment has suggested, reflexivity can be fostered at any stage of a reader's development, especially through deviant texts. And, as Jack Thomson has noted, "once readers become reflexively interested in their own reading processes they can be helped to progress to higher levels of reading...." My next investigation, then, still in progress, is being conducted with a Year 11 class of mixed-ability sixteen-year olds, to encourage them to move to what Thomson has identified as the highest level, when "readers are fully aware of the textual functions of the implied author and the implied reader and the relationship between them." This introduces the metacognitive function of fiction: stories both are systems of communication and knowledge, and are about such systems. That is why, when students become more aware of their own reading processes, they may also become more alert to the strategies they too can set up as writers.

The text I used with that class is a complex metafiction, one which would not usually be deemed suitable for schools. But I can report that I have used Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*... with great success at this level. As you may know, it too is deviant in continually turning away from its path. Indeed, the whole narrative is constructed around the absence of a story. We tend, of course, to use the term "narrative" as if it were interchangeable with "story"; but in more precise usage narrative refers to the act and situation of telling and need not assume there is a story-content being told (i.e. a linked series of events). Par excellence, Calvino's text shifts the emphasis from product to process. It is, in Barthes' phrase, a most "writerly" text. And that was precisely its interest for me.

In using *Traveller* with my class I have so far focused on just one of the aspects of my previous research:on the ways students can be encouraged to develop a reflexive awareness of the reading processes set up in a text. At this stage I have not yet introduced "creative" writing, except potentially--as you shall see.

This has been our procedure: after the students had read *Traveller*, at a first discussion session I acted as recorder while they aired their perplexities, located for themselves the key issues, and formulated their questions. For our next class I produced a typed version of their discussion -- I had grouped together the points and summarised some, but had not otherwise altered or added to their contributions. This opened up further, exploratory discussion, after which I suggested for an assignment that they could respond to the novel not by writing in the customary lit-crit essay mode but by taking a different stance -- as a reader writing for a student reader in next year's Year 11 class. My aim in inviting them to construct a "Traveller's Guide" to *Traveller* was to allow the students to determine for themselves and their fellow-readers the important questions and the best ways to approach any problems of interpretation. As it turned out, a number of students formulated their Guides largely in the interrogative mode, but I don't think they were thereby simply deferring the responsibility for finding answers. After all, the very act of articulating a series of questions for a text is an integral part of our practice as readers. And Calvino's work makes it abundantly clear that there is no single determinate meaning or "answer" to the perplexities set up in the very text itself. This mode of response, then, is a most appropriate way of discovering the strategies the writing sets up for the reader. So the students found, as they practised an analogous procedure: a kind of meta-commentary on a metafiction!

Nevertheless, my students did also offer some answers for their fellow readers -- as we shall now see. Among the many possible points I could pick up from those Guides, I have excerpted those which have special

bearing on the two connected aspects of a reader's response dealt with earlier in this paper. The first concerns students' reflexive awareness of (a) the processes of their reading, and (b) the ways in which they consequently construct a meaning for the text, and therefore (c) the relationship between reader, text and author. *Traveller* certainly puts the reader into an unexpected relationship with author and text, as Calvino invites the real reader outside the text to move inside it as the implied reader, who is present in the narrative as addressee. This fiction consciously demonstrates how (to use Genette's phrasing), "the real author of the narrative is not only the one who tells it, but also, at times even more the one who hears it." Of course, it would be quite inappropriate to introduce sixteen-year olds to the abstractions of critical theory; instead, during this reading experience the students came to discover that they were the ones who were travelling -- through the text in search of the story and its author, and so they found themselves co-authoring the narrative. Their reflections arose in the course of that experience: they were in fact practising theory.

Let's hear a number of the students speak for themselves.

[Excerpts A on handout sheet]

The headings and grouping of excerpts are mine, for your convenience. Otherwise they are exactly as the students produced them, using their own words, not mine or those of any theorist of metafiction -- except perhaps Calvino himself! You'll see, as you skim through, that they have indeed shown their awareness of reading processes, of the textual functions of the implied reader and the implied author, and of the ways meaning emerges through the relationship between author and reader. And in turn the student readers have similarly become authors, in their direct address to their readers.

The second point I wish to pick up here concerns the students' thoughts about their expectations that the story or stories would be completed. Here again these readers came to grasp that in the very process of reading is the text; and that no product is ever complete on the page. For one thing, a narrative awaits a reader's (re)production through the act of narration; for another, around every story lie other stories. No text is determinate, completely controlled by the author's authority. Again, we'll let the students voice their own understanding.

[Excerpts B on handout sheet]

You will have noticed that some of the students made suggestions about rewriting parts of the text, composing in analogous forms, or continuing some of the incompleted stories. This could lead to yet more fluid modes

of writing in future, in which the distinctions between the "creative" and the "literary-critical" are further broken down and themselves submitted to scrutiny. For example, in the next stage of this investigation I intend to invite the students to carry through some of those "creative writing" suggestions -- and then to interrogate themselves as writers about their shaping of their implied readers' responses. When students learn the ways of creating such effects in their readers they gain greater access to literary voices, and are thereby the more empowered.

I have spoken today about some of the ways I have encouraged senior secondary students to take up various positions as readers and writers. The principles which underlie such pedagogical practice can however be put into practice at diverse levels of schooling, with a range of texts. Perhaps in discussion members of the audience would like to consider the application of what I have been discussing to their own students and their own courses in reading and writing.

TRAVELLERS' GUIDES TO
IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELLER

A. METACOMMENTARY

Address to the Reader:

If Lost on a Winter's Night a Travelling
You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel... or maybe you have already faced the misty inner depths. I presume you have not read to the end of this novel, because for what other reason would you consult such a guide as this one?....
Relax. Concentrate. No-one can admit this is an easy book to comprehend. This guide has come into existance to aid analytical readers of If on a Winter's Night a Traveller, yes, that's you. Like it or not, you will become a creation of Italo Calvino, one of his characters.....
Peter

If you feel that you can't relate to the first section, then how do [you] like an author who is talking to you directly, as if he is sitting right next to you? For that matter how do you feel about reading these notes? Does it annoy you to think that I'm delving into your mind, trying to control and shape your ideas on Calvino's new novel? You see, this is what Calvino is trying to do to you! Do you believe me? Why / why not? Is it exhausting, because you have to keep "on your toes", in case something more unusual takes place? Write a paragraph using the same mode as Calvino uses in the first chapter. Use any topic you wish. Ask somebody else to read it. Did they feel it was similar to Calvino? Is it easy to write something like this? Would you call the first chapter a monologue, a dialouge, or is Calvino putting words into your mouth?
Justine

The Reading Process:

As you can see, there were many points about the process of reading (and possibly what we expect from the world of literature) raised [in the first chapter].
Can you identify with anything that Calvino assumed about you?
I couldn't. Because I don't buy books or work in an office. Nor do I derive special pleausure from newly published books.
However, Calvino isn't telling you the Yr 11) what you are doing (because as far as I know that is impossible -- unless....)
By using this method of "narration" which we are mostly unused to in the "novel", he is saying [one of] either 2 things:
You can decide later on what you beleive, either wich one you support OR find an answer of your own.
Naomi

The Relationship between Reader and Writer:

These are the Two Things:
1. Calvino has created a character but in his ingenuity had decided to tell the story to the character AS IT HAPPENS.
We may be "listening in on" or intruding in on a conversation (with just Calvino talking) that is taking place right now (or present time in the book).
2. Calvino is generalising about all readers and the processes they go through but is adressing us individually in the book.
Have you ever read a book where this has been done before?
Its sacriligious, really because our anonimity is destroyed in a way. Italo knows there's someone reading so he exploits it --eg: exploits the writer/reader relationship. Certainly there is no such thing as a"true" book unless it is read and affects the readers somehow in an individual way.
Naomi

You are confronted with a direct narration, "you". It immediately draws you into the book to become part of the story, rather than an eavesdropper. To overcome any misjudgements with this technique you should prepare yourself by imagining you are about to go on stage and act. You know your role, but do not know of the director's intent, nor the roles of the other actors. Do not fear your position, remember one gains more from being part of something than not. Calvino is probably suggesting this to you by using this style. In Chapter one you will feel like the author has control of you. You are being made a bookworm, whether or not you like this position.... This also make you self-conscious. You have been moulded into this character subconsciously and cannot escape this, except by not continuing to read. Calvino has become the director of the play. He is controlling you. This is a strange sensation as usually you control yourself when reading.
Suggestion: you could compose a play of this story. The chapters are the off-stage directing and the stories (which are part of the title) are the play. Keep in mind, however, that both the offstage directing and the performance are connected by the characters. In the novel, you are the connection between the stories and the chapters.
Libby

The Reader's Expectations and Interpretations:

Well, what is the book about?
To me the book is primarily about the power of the author. How the author manipulates the reader and the readers expectations. The author can, in a way as Calvino does, bring you into a magical doorway then slam the door into your face. What do you think now?
Peter

It teaches us about our technique of reading. We read, then reflect on what we have read. This is done blatantly in this story, but if you consider the concept, you realise you do it subconsciously while you are reading; forming judgements.... Calvino expresses the idea that every individual interprets a story differently. Language has many connotations which creates these different interpretations. Consider: who creates the text, is it the reader or a combination? The author must obey the reader's expectations.... Yet on the other hand, the author controls your reading.
Libby

The novel makes you think while you are reading; you are constantly piecing together information to understand it. It is also making you reflect on your reading technique subconsciously while reading. Calvino here is pointing out the importance of the reader to his novel.... The author and the reader both combine to give an understanding of the text.
Libby

Define the role of the author and his right to place interpretation into a book. Is the reader wrong if he doesn't perceive the interpretation that the author wished to present?
Rachel

The Reader's Production of the Text:

Is there any reason for the order of these stories or could they have been shuffled around not changing the text for you?
To consider the above question more thouroughly you may like to skim the book as you would read it with the "story chapters" in a different order. If there is little difference, what would this tell us about the identity of the author? Could "we" (the readers) be a factor in creating the text?
Rachel

TRAVELLERS' GUIDES: B

Textual Indeterminacy:

*Is the story, or the text, the same for all who read it?
*What factors might influence your reaction to a certain text?
*What are the possibilities of a story? In how many different ways can a story be told? For example take a nursery rhyme and think of the desicions that your mind must take, or the questions it could ask, about this simple story.

Sample answer: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall....
What was he doing on the wall?
Why did he fall?
How far did he fall?
At what time of day?
What did he look like?
What did Humpty do for a living?
Do this with your own rhyme.
You can see that a simple text such as a nursery rhyme can be taken in a million possible ways.
Is this true for the Calvino?
Rachel

AN IDEA: Here is the world of literature and fiction, a dark undefined mass of POTENTIAL. Anyone has the potential to pluck a "story" out and shape it and when written the further potential remains in the reader to be touched or even changed by it. Creation.
Could it work like this or is fiction too "earthbound" and dependant on the author's own experience?
Naomi

Remember, do not attempt to read it as an ordinary novel; don't be surprised by the lack of beginnings and endings (and sometimes middles!), the book does not describe events in the usual linear fashion. This style is in fact part of the book's theme; Calvino is making his story/stories similar to life. He is saying that a story is not just a description of events from one segment in time it continues in many directions; all stories and times are woven together in an intricate web. Don't let your interest be frazzled by the numerous "incompleted" stories; for you know that they lead you to the center of the web, where you will look back and see, all the connections.
Kate

You are puzzled by the "void". Ponder on your diagram of storylines. It should be a web of stories, their similarities overlapping. This void is the gaps in the web. The space for new stories to form, and perhaps, the reflections and possible stories forming in the minds of the readers.... Try to paint an impressionist painting of this image, making sure you create the feeling it continues beyond your page. Also consider: what does time have to do with your picture? The time it took to paint it, think about it, and how it continues on. Where did it start? Did the idea seed from another painting or a book you read? an experience? Who translates the meaning in your picture? Contemplate the relation of time to your painting and then to the novel.
Libby

The Reader's Expectations of an Ending:

How much time did it take for you to read this novel? Did you enjoy the end? Do you feel that end was abrupt? Calvino probably planned the novel so that it would end with the same sort of jerk that it started with. Is it an appropriate position to end such a complex novel? Or do you think that it could have ended at an earlier or later stage? Could it really have ended at all? Had you realised that each of the stories conformed to the readers expectations? That they stopped before the climax, because this is what the reader expected? .... The story may not necessarily end, it may have branched out and taken another direction altogether.... For instance, I could continually talk about the idea of Calvino's book not ending and completely change the topic of discussion (not doing such a bad job hey!). This assignment need never end at all!
Justine

The novel includes the question of a beginning and an end. The first word of every page refers to something that has already happened outside the book. The book begins at infinity and ends at that same point in the authors and readers minds. You are asked, "Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end?...." Stories continue to live while we are alive; when our minds die, they die.
Libby

The author in the novel tells you: "every novel I begin writing is exhausted shortly after the beginning as if I had already said everything I have to say." Do you suppose that this is the essence of why all these stories are incomplete? Are they complete from the author's point of view? Do you think you have a right to say they are incomplete just because they don't have an explicit ending? Perhaps you could try writing an end to a story to see if you result in repeating the storyline?
Libby

If you dislike one of the stories (yes, I know there must be a[t] least one!) try to rewrite it, feel free to let it go off in a different direction, make the characters seem more realistic to you. Check with someone else to see if your new story and escpecially character, fits your friend's description. Why might you have different ideas about the same character? Do you think that every book is different for every person who reads it? Or that a book cannot exist until it is read? Discuss this topic in a group -- it has many possibilities!

Justine

NARRATIVE DEVIANCE
The Conventional and the Creative in Reading and Writing

Wendy R. Morgan

The conventional view that stories should be coherent and conclusive has been promoted by (among others) information-processing psychologists, whose research and theory are currently influential in reading education. These researchers posit the existence in memory of a "story schema" or Platonic Form of "storyness". In comprehending and recalling a particular story the reader makes it conform in structural and semantic cohesiveness to the model. Teachers are therefore urged to give young readers "well-structured" stories in order to develop the prototypes for comprehension.

By contrast this paper proposes that introducing even fairly young readers to a range of story structures and less structured texts (or "deviant narratives") may encourage the development of more diverse and accommodating schemata and the capacity to make inferences about the links between discourse units.

For reading is not merely reception. And it is not ultimately separate from writing, for each is a (re)creative act of production. It follows that not only as readers but also as writers, our students might develop flexibility if they learn to produce a diverse range of narrative exempla. That hypothesis underlies the two forms of classroom research reported on here. The first has investigated ways of encouraging upper secondary students to go beyond the conventional story structure models in both their reading and their writing. The second has attempted to foster the development of students' reflexive awareness of their reading processes and the productive role of the reader implied in the text. This consciousness has two benefits for the writer: it can lead to more fluid modes of discourse, which interrogate distinctions between the "creative" and the "literary-critical"; and it can give students greater access to literary voices when they learn to set up in their own texts their readers' co-productive responses.